

Dr. Ashish Sen
Director, Bureau of Transportation Statistics
Welcoming Remarks
Safety in Numbers Intermodal Safety Data Conference
Washington, DC
January 9, 2002

Thank you, Demetra. Good morning. Thank you for joining us today in this continuing effort to make our transportation system even safer than it is today.

My acknowledgments to the National Safety Council for its support on this project, especially Vice President Chuck Hurley and Dr. Mei-Li Lin. Thanks to Professor Sue Baker of The Johns Hopkins Center for Injury Research and Policy for her leadership and work on this project and also for convincing an impressive group of transportation and data experts to work on our project.

Also, my acknowledgements to the scientists at The National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. I hope for continuing collaborative scientific research with them in the area of transportation safety.

Thanks, too, to Demetra, Beth Bradley and Kim Hill for their continuing efforts on the Safety Data Plan and for their extra efforts to arrange this conference.

Thanks particularly to all these people at a time when the transportation system has been responding to the events of September 11.

We are all here today because there are too many people being killed as a result of transportation incidents. In 2000, there were more than 44,000 transportation-related deaths. That number is unacceptable and it makes the Safety Data Initiative a top priority.

Working together, we must improve the quality of safety data so planners and decision-makers can make more informed safety decisions. Informed decisions are more likely to lead to fewer deaths and injuries.

We all recognize that safety data are not everything that they could be or need to be. BTS has audited several DOT databases and the results were not reassuring. At least two databases needed to be re-engineered to make the data reliable.

We all know, from our personal experience, cases of other databases where the data are subject to systematic errors that prevent us from doing useful safety analysis.

One database on grade-crossing accidents, for example, appeared to show that the sounding of a locomotive horn at a grade crossing *reduced* safety rather than enhancing it. It was only when the agency's staff checked the accuracy of the data that the errors were discovered.

Timeliness is also a particularly critical problem —some of our safety data are not available for two years after the event. One senior DOT official characterized some of our safety data as being like "light from a distant star -- it may have been extinguished long ago by the time we see it." Timely data are essential to taking action on unsafe conditions.

We must gather safety data in a more consistent, systematic way from all modes of transportation. In some modes, "operator error" is commonly assigned as the "cause" of an accident, without ever investigating why the operator made the error, and what can be done to prevent similar errors in the future.

In some modes, operator fatigue is commonly reviewed as a possible contributing factor in an accident; in others, fatigue is only considered when its presence is unmistakable. We need to make sure that we are gathering systematic safety data.

We have been working together on the Safety Data Initiative for more than two years. When we met last year, I pledged that we would return to the stakeholders to share the draft reports of the implementation plan.

We believe we have a series of proposals that will make major advances in safety data. And we believe BTS can play a unique leadership role in coordinating improvements in transportation safety data.

We have the drafts for you today but the most important thing of all is for us to hear your comments. It is essential to us to have broad-based support for the projects and for all of us to reach agreement on the direction we are heading.

As we move forward after today, we will be submitting our report to Secretary Mineta in the near future and then we will be developing programs for the reauthorization process.

But, as in all our efforts, it must be a partnership. By working together, we will produce higher quality data that can lead to a safer transportation system.

Thank you for coming here today and for your work on these projects. Through projects such as the Safety Data Initiative, we will ensure that data remains the light in enlightened policy.

When we met last year, I called the Safety Data Initiative an ambitious undertaking and said we should aim high. Today, we are still keeping our vision high. With our vision, and with our joint efforts, we can, as Secretary Mineta has said, “create a dynasty of safety for the future.”

And now, I am proud to introduce our keynote speaker. Congressman Bob Borski from Philadelphia, PA has served on the House Transportation Committee since 1983 and has played a key role on every transportation bill the committee has considered.

In 1991, he led the effort on ISTEA to prevent expansion of the network that can be used by triple trailers. In this Congress, he became Ranking Member of the Highways and Transit Subcommittee.

Congressman Borski has a long-term interest in safety. As chairman of the House Investigations and Oversight Subcommittee in 1993 and 1994, he chaired hearings on safety comparisons across modes. We are honored to have Congressmen Borski as our keynote speaker today.

###